



Putting people first

Via strong two-way communication channels, McSherry Electrical has increased its turnover year on year, while at the same time giving employees the opportunity to develop their careers

'When you invest in people and give them that input, then that result is positive for both the company and the individual'

Brian and Neil McSherry

LONG before the global economic downturn hit, the manufacturing sector in Ireland has had its own issues to face. Many of McSherry Electrical's key clients were in the manufacturing area, and as companies such as Irish Sugar and Dell cut back on services, it necessitated the pursuit of new markets for the firm.

McSherry Electrical set about crafting a business plan in 2005, identifying growth markets such as infrastructure, healthcare and sports and leisure. Determined to adapt to changing markets, it is this tenacity that has seen the company go from strength to strength since. So successful has the plan been that, over the past three years, McSherry Electrical has increased its turnover by an average of 40pc each year.

McSherry Electrical was established in 1986 by Brian McSherry, who had been working for some years in electrical services in a wide range of industries. The company has always placed a careful emphasis on quality and service, but it placed its staff at the core of its business plan. Neil McSherry, commercial manager at the firm, says its human resources (HR) focus has been hugely responsible for its success since.

"We did a strong analysis of our business, and some of the feedback we got from clients indicated we had a key differentiator: our employees. Our trade employees were our interface with the clients, and on that basis we chose to invest in them," he says.

McSherry Electrical operates with a permanent staff of about 35, and provides work to temporary staff or subcontractors throughout the year. In 2007, it achieved the FÁS Excellence Through People standard, which helped management develop its HR strategy. "We believe HR is synonymous with a trade-orientated business," says McSherry.

The company has broken its HR practices into a number of sections — namely business planning and quality improvement; communication and people involvement; leadership and people management; learning and development; recruitment and selection; and well-being.

Communication is crucial for the company, according to McSherry. There is a multitude of methods, from standard management and staff meetings to Toolbox Talks, which are held regularly to convey any information that's relevant.

"We also issue circulars with wages, and make presentations. Most importantly, we believe in one-to-one meetings. Performance-evaluation meetings are held annually, but feedback is given both to and from the employee," he says. Any suggestions are taken on-board, and McSherry says this has helped develop strong trust levels.

"Our core business requires accurate and continuous communication. We need that feedback to fuel continual improvement."

McSherry Electrical doesn't just pay lip-service to its open-door policy, and staff members recognise this. The firm enjoys a very low turnover of staff, which McSherry attributes to both good two-way communication

and staff development.

Many of the company's employees have worked with the firm for over a decade, and many of its site management and project management team have worked their way up the ranks.

McSherry tells of one particular individual who started his career as an apprentice, and progressed to project supervisor. As part of his learning and development, he did a management programme and came up with an innovative process system, which has made the handover of key documentation to clients less arduous and more streamlined.

"By implementing his idea, the company has become more efficient and we've got a more motivated employee. The net result was a positive for both of us. Some companies cut down on HR during difficult times, but we believe it's to their detriment," adds McSherry.

Letting staff know there is development potential and that their ideas are respected is also great for building on trust levels. Every year, management at McSherry Electrical sits down with employees to draw up goals for the coming year to align with both what the employee wants and the needs of the business. The training provided by the firm is also comprehensive, ranging from everything from trade skills through to IT and health and safety qualifications.

He says trust brings many business benefits. "Trust is crucial to our success, and it's not only about the current environment. It's vital at all times. We're not in a position to micromanage, so our people have to be autonomous," McSherry adds.